# The Fourth Commandment

*Exodus 20:8-11*

## Study

This chapter examines the Fourth Commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20:8-11, concerning the observance of the Sabbath. The commandment reveals God's gracious provision of rest for His people, reflecting both the pattern of creation and the redemption accomplished in Christ. Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people, distinguishing them from the surrounding nations. The commandment includes both a positive instruction to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy and a negative prohibition against ordinary labor on the seventh day. This study considers the theological foundations of the Sabbath, its purpose in both creation and redemption, its observance in Israel, and its fulfillment in Christ for the Church today. The Christian observance of the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, commemorates Christ's resurrection and our redemption and anticipates the eternal rest that awaits all who trust in Jesus.

## Introduction

The Fourth Commandment stands out among the Ten Commandments in several ways. It is one of the longest commandments, second only to the Second Commandment in its length. It is the only commandment that begins with a positive instruction rather than a prohibition. While the other commandments tell us what not to do, the Fourth Commandment tells us what we are to do: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

The Sabbath was a gift from God to humanity. It was not a burden but a blessing. Jesus declared in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In our culture today, with its constant activity and endless pursuit of productivity, we need to hear this commandment perhaps more than any other. One day in seven should be a delight to our souls. Thomas Watson, writing of this delight, explains, "The Sabbath is a market day for the soul. It is the golden spot of the week. God has set apart one day in seven for his immediate worship and service. As he has six days for us, so he will have one day for himself. This day is to be sanctified, that is, set apart

for holy uses."[1] We need to see that God created us with a need for rest, both physical and spiritual. He established a pattern of work and rest that reflects His own work in creation.

The Fourth Commandment connects us to the beginning of God's revelation. It points us back to Genesis and the creation week. When God rested on the seventh day, He was not fatigued. Rather, He was establishing a pattern for His creatures. He was showing us that there is an order to life, a rhythm of labor and rest, of work and worship. This commandment should remind us that we are not merely workers trying to make a living. We are worshippers created for fellowship with our Creator. We are created to give Him glory and praise. Giving God glory is the great purpose of all mankind.

Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath was a distinguishing mark of God's covenant people. It set them apart from surrounding nations and reminded them each week of their belonging to the Lord. Observing the Sabbath was a confession of faith, acknowledging that God was their Creator and Redeemer. In Ezekiel 20:12, it was a sign between God and His people. "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, *as a sign* between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them."

## The Sabbath in Creation

Before we examine the commandment itself, we need to consider the Sabbath's foundation in creation. Genesis 2:2-3 tells us, "And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." Notice the language. "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." This means He set it apart as special, different from the other six days. He did this before the fall of man into sin. The Sabbath was not introduced later as a consequence of sin. It was part of God's good creation from the beginning.

[1] Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 97.

When God rested on the seventh day, He was not recovering from a hard week of work. The prophet reminds us of this: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary" (Isaiah 40:28). God's rest was a cessation of His work of creation. It was a completion, a satisfaction with what He had accomplished. In Genesis 1:31, we read that "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

God's rest on the seventh day established a pattern for humanity. We are created in God's image, and part of being an image-bearer means following the pattern He set. Six days of labor followed by one day of rest reflects the very order of creation. It is integral to God's design for the world. This is why the Fourth Commandment is not arbitrary. It is grounded in the way God made us.

Some have suggested that the Sabbath was only for Israel and has no application to us today. However, the Sabbath's foundation in creation teaches otherwise. The Sabbath principle precedes the giving of the law at Sinai and goes back to the beginning. Robert Rayburn offers us a helpful comment. He writes, “The Sabbath, if the keeping holy of one day out of the week, if the setting apart of one day for holy purposes is a creation ordinance, intended for the life of all mankind, intended to be part of human life even if there had been no Fall, then it becomes exceedingly hard to believe that the Sabbath just fell away in the new epoch established by Christ and his apostles.”[2]While the specific day may change, as we will see, the principle of one day in seven for rest and worship remains.

## The Commandment Examined

Exodus 20:8-11 reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and

[2] Robert S. Rayburn, "Studies in Exodus 16:1–6" (sermon, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, August 21, 2005), https://www.faithtacoma.org/exodus/2005-08-21-pm.

earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

The commandment begins with the word "remember." This is significant. God's people are called to remember what He has done. They are to remember creation. They are to remember His provision. They are to remember that He is Lord in all things, including our time. The word "remember" implies that we might forget if we are not careful. In the busy activity of life, in the pursuit of our own interests, we can forget God. The Sabbath calls us to stop and remember.

The command to keep the Sabbath holy calls us to set it apart and make it distinct from the other six days. It's not for our usual routines, but a day devoted to the Lord. Holiness, at its core, means separation: something sacred is reserved solely for God's purposes. The Sabbath day is holy because God has claimed it as His own.

Notice that the commandment includes a mandate to work. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." This is important. God is not calling us to be idle. Work is good. It is part of God's design for us. Before the fall, Adam was given work to do in the garden. Labor itself is not a curse, though sin has certainly made work more difficult and frustrating. God calls us to faithful labor six days a week. By "work," we do not mean only paid employment. Ask any mother raising children at home whether what she does is “work”!

On the seventh day, we are to cease our ordinary labor. The prohibition is comprehensive. "On it you shall not do any work." This applies not only to the head of the household but to everyone under his care. Sons, daughters, servants, and even livestock are to rest. This shows God's compassion and concern for all His creatures. The Sabbath rest is not just for the privileged few but for everyone.

The commandment ends by pointing us back to creation. "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the

LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." The reason for the Sabbath is rooted in God's creative work. We rest because God rested. We follow His pattern because we are His creatures.

### The Sabbath as a Sign

In several places in Scripture, the Sabbath is described as a sign. In Exodus 31:13, God says, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.'" The Sabbath was a visible marker of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

The prophet Ezekiel also speaks of the Sabbath as a sign. In Ezekiel 20:12, God says, "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them." The observance of the Sabbath distinguished Israel from all other nations. It was a weekly testimony to the world that Israel belonged to the Lord.

This understanding of the Sabbath as a sign helps us see its importance. It was not merely a day off from work. It was a confession of faith. It was an acknowledgment that God was their Creator and Redeemer. When Israel faithfully observed the Sabbath, they were proclaiming to the watching world that they served a different God, a God who had entered into covenant with them.

The Sabbath also pointed forward to something greater. It was a shadow of the reality that would come in Christ. The book of Hebrews tells us that the Sabbath rest was a picture of the spiritual rest we have in Christ. Hebrews 4:9-10 says, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." The true Sabbath rest is found not in a particular day but in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

## The Sabbath in Israel's History

Throughout Israel's history, the observance of the Sabbath was a recurring issue. At times, the people faithfully kept the Sabbath. At other times, they neglected it. The prophets frequently rebuked Israel for its failure to honor the Sabbath.

Isaiah addressed this issue. In Isaiah 58:13-14, God says, "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable, if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth." Notice the condition. If Israel were to honor the Sabbath, it would be blessed. The opposite was also true. If they dishonored the Sabbath, they would face judgment.

Jeremiah also warned the people about Sabbath breaking. In Jeremiah 17:21-22, the prophet says, "Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers." The people were engaging in commerce on the Sabbath, treating it like any other day. This was a violation of God's command and a sign of their spiritual condition.

Nehemiah faced the same problem upon returning to Jerusalem after the exile. Nehemiah 13:15-18 records his response. He saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in grain, loading donkeys, and selling produce in Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuked the leaders and reminded them that this very sin had brought God's judgment upon their fathers. He took steps to enforce Sabbath observance, including closing the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath to prevent merchants from entering.

These examples from Israel's history show us that Sabbath observance was not optional. It was a serious matter. The way Israel treated the Sabbath revealed the condition of their hearts. When they observed the Sabbath, they acknowledged God's lordship over their lives. When they profaned the Sabbath, they were declaring their independence from God.

## Jesus and the Sabbath

In the New Testament, the Sabbath was a point of controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees had added many regulations to the Sabbath commandment, creating a burden for the people that God never intended. They had turned the Sabbath from a blessing into a burden of legal requirements.

Jesus challenged their misuse of the Sabbath. He healed on the Sabbath, which outraged the Pharisees. In John 5:16-17, we read, "And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'" Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. He was demonstrating the Sabbath's true purpose, which was to bring blessing and restoration to God's people.

On another occasion, when the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded them of David eating the bread of the Presence when he was hungry. This was considered unlawful because only the priests were allowed to eat the bread. Then Jesus made the remarkable statement we mentioned earlier: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was a gift, not a burden. It was meant to serve human needs, not to oppress people with endless regulations.

Jesus also declared, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." This was a claim to deity. He asserted His authority over the Sabbath because He was the one who instituted it in creation. He was Lord of all, including the Sabbath. His hearers would have understood this as a declaration of His divine identity.

The healings Jesus performed on the Sabbath were not violations of God's law. They were acts of mercy and compassion. They demonstrated that doing good on the Sabbath was entirely appropriate. The Pharisees had so twisted the Sabbath commandment that they believed it was wrong to help someone in need on the Sabbath. Jesus corrected their error and showed them the heart of God.

## The Lord's Day

After the resurrection of Jesus, something significant happened. The early Christians began gathering for worship on the first day of the week, not the seventh. This was the day Jesus rose from the dead. It was the day He appeared to His disciples. It was also the day the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. The first day of the week became known as the Lord's Day.

We see this pattern in Acts 20:7, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them." The early church gathered on the first day of the week for worship. In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul instructs the believers, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper." The first day was set aside for corporate worship and giving.

The apostle John calls the first day of the week "the Lord's day" in Revelation 1:10. This designation indicates that the day belonged to the Lord Jesus in a special way. It was His day, the day of His resurrection, the day when the Church gathered to worship Him.

This change from the seventh day to the first day was not arbitrary. It reflected the new reality brought about by the resurrection. The old covenant Sabbath pointed both back to the creation order and forward to the rest that would come through Christ. Now that Christ had come and accomplished redemption, the day of worship changed to commemorate His victory over sin and death. The Lord's Day became the Christian Sabbath, a day to remember the new creation inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. The prophet Haggai wrote that “the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:9). In like manner, the glory of redemption is greater than the glory of Creation. Thomas Watson, writing on this subject, explains this further. “The grand reason for changing the Jewish Sabbath to the Lord’s day is that it puts us in mind of the mystery of our redemption by Christ. The reason why God instituted the old Sabbath was to be a

memorial of the creation; but he has now brought the first day of the week in its room in memory of a more glorious work than creation, which is redemption."[3]

The Westminster Confession of Faith addresses this change in Chapter 21, Section 7. It states that the Sabbath was changed "to the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath." The principle of one day in seven for worship and rest continues, but the day changed to commemorate Christ's resurrection.

## The Sabbath Fulfilled in Christ

The writer of Hebrews helps us understand how Christ fulfills the Sabbath. In Hebrews 4:1-11, the author speaks of entering God's rest. He warns his readers not to fall short of entering that rest through unbelief, just as the wilderness generation did. Then he explains, "For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his."

The true Sabbath rest is the rest of salvation. It is ceasing from our own works to save ourselves and trusting in Christ's finished work on our behalf. In John 19, we read that on the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished." The work of redemption was complete. We enter that rest by faith, trusting in what Christ has done rather than in our own efforts.

This does not mean the weekly Sabbath is no longer relevant. Rather, it now takes on fuller meaning. It reminds us each week of the spiritual rest we have in Christ through His work of redemption. It gives us a sense of the eternal rest that awaits us. It calls us to cease from our labors and focus on worship, fellowship, and the things of God.

Colossians 2:16-17 says, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." The Sabbath under the old covenant was a shadow pointing to Christ. Now that we have Christ, we are not to judge one another about days.

[3] Watson, *The Ten Commandments,* 96.

However, this does not abolish the principle of setting aside one day in seven for worship and rest.

The Lord's Day is a gift to the Church. It is a day to gather with God's people, hear His Word proclaimed, celebrate the sacraments, and pray and sing praises to His name. It is a day to rest from our ordinary labors and focus on eternal things. It is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath rest that awaits all who are in Christ.

It has often been said that man is his own worst enemy. I suggest that ignoring the blessings of the Lord's Day is a classic example. For many years in Western culture, Sundays were recognized as a special day, and there was at least some remnant of respect for observance. Those days are long gone, and sadly, they are long gone even among many professing Christians. Ernest C. Reisinger reminds us of the Church's great need to understand the blessings of this special day. "Our generation is in desperate need of some biblical instruction concerning the fourth Commandment. We should be shocked when we learn that some Bible teachers and ministers undermine the practice of the worship and service of God by excluding the Fourth Commandment from the Decalogue. Antinomians rant against the Fourth Commandment. Legalists make it unpleasant and impassable. Instructed Christians delight in it. The Fourth Commandment is worthy of serious study because of its importance in our spiritual warfare and is crucial for our corrupt generation."[4]

## Application for the Church Today

What does the Fourth Commandment mean for us today? How should we observe the Lord's Day? These are important questions, and Christians throughout history and in modern times have answered them in different ways. God has given us principles from Scripture to guide our practice.

[4] Ernest C. Reisinger, *Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 46.

We can begin with the simple fact that we should honor the Lord's Day as a special day set apart for worship. This is the primary purpose of the day. We are to gather with the people of God for corporate worship. The writer of Hebrews 10:25 warns us, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Corporate worship on the Lord's Day is not optional for Christians. It is a command from the Word of God.

Also, we should rest from our ordinary labors on the Lord's Day. This means, as much as possible, avoiding the work we do the other six days of the week. Yes, there will always be exceptions and the need to work, but as God providentially allows, we should observe this special day. If we labor in an office during the week, Sunday should not be a day for office work. If we labor with our hands during the week, Sunday should be a day of rest from that labor. God calls us to cease from our regular work so we can focus on Him.

This does not mean the Lord's Day should be a day of laziness or idleness. It is a day for active engagement in worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and fellowship with other believers. It is a day to do good, serve others, visit the sick and needy, and encourage one another in the faith. Jesus showed us that works of mercy and necessity are entirely appropriate on the Sabbath.

We should guard against treating the Lord's Day like any other day. The Puritans warned against making the Lord's Day a day for personal pleasure and pursuits. As Thomas Watson so elegantly put it, it is the “Market day for the soul.” If this is true, and I believe it is, I suggest, dear reader, that you feed your soul! While we should find joy and delight in the day, let our focus be on the Lord rather than on ourselves. Isaiah's words remain relevant: "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable" (Isaiah 58:13).

This raises questions about what activities are appropriate on the Lord's Day. Is it right to engage in recreation or entertainment on Sunday? Should we shop or eat at restaurants, activities that require others to work? These are matters of conscience, and Christians may differ in their convictions. In matters of someone else’s conscience, we should be gracious and let Christian

love be our guide. The important point is that we should all strive to be guided by the principle that this blessed day belongs to the Lord and should be used primarily for His glory and our spiritual good.

In addition, we should recognize that the Lord's Day is a blessing, not a burden. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man." God gave us the Lord's Day for our good. In our culture's hectic pace, we need time to stop, rest, worship, and focus on eternal things. Without such a day, we become consumed by the things of this world. The Lord's Day is God's gracious provision for our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It is harmful to our families and us when we ignore God’s gracious provision for our good. This blessed day is a gift, and as such, let us not refuse the Giver!

Finally, we should remember that the Lord's Day points us to the ultimate rest that awaits us. Hebrews 4:9 tells us, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." Every Lord's Day reminds us that this world is not our home. Christians are pilgrims journeying toward eternal rest. One day, all our labor will be done. One day, we will enter the presence of our Savior and rest from our works. Until that day, the Lord's Day gives us a weekly taste of that eternal rest.

## Conclusion

To summarize and conclude our study, the Fourth Commandment calls us to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. It reminds us that we are not merely workers, but worshippers created for fellowship with God. The commandment and the example God gave us are rooted in creation, when God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant between God and His people.

The Sabbath finds its fulfillment in Christ, who is the Lord of the Sabbath. Through His death and resurrection, He accomplished the work of redemption and entered into His rest. We enter that rest by faith, ceasing from our own works and trusting in His finished work. The Lord's Day, the first day of the week, commemorates Christ's resurrection and gives us a weekly opportunity to worship Him and rest in Him.

For the Church today, the Lord's Day remains a gift from God. It is a day to gather with God's people for worship, to hear His Word, to celebrate the sacraments, and to encourage one another. It is a day to rest from our ordinary labors and focus on eternal things. It is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath rest that awaits all who are in Christ. Given this blessed day, let us "call the Sabbath a delight."[5]

Dear reader, let us honor the Lord's Day faithfully, not as a burden but as a blessing. May we use the day as God intended, for worship, rest, and spiritual renewal. And may we look forward to that great day when our labors will be done, and we will enter into the eternal rest God has prepared for His people. As we keep the Lord's Day, we declare to family, neighbors, friends, and the watching world that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, that our lives are ordered by His Word, and that our hope is in Him alone. To Him be glory forever. Amen.

*"Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89).*

[5] Isaiah 58:13-14.